

Rachel Meunier: Communal Living in the Late 60s and Early 70s (1994)

(Rachel Meunier grew up in The Farm)

Intent: To better understand some of the reasons behind the movement toward communal living during the late 1960s and early 1970s and some of the purposes for this social reconstruction.

What usually comes to mind when thinking about the concept of a “commune”? More often than not images such as drugs and free love associated with the 1960s are visualized. In actuality, communes have existed since history has been recorded. For example, the Puritans who settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony may have been one of the first utopian communities in the United States. In the late 1960s more than 2,000 communes were formed in the United States.

Although I grew up on a commune I was never sure what exactly a commune was defined as, I only knew what it was like to live on a commune. When I left the commune at twelve years old, the reaction I got from others astounded me. Either people asked if I was a “commie,” or thought I belonged to a “cult.” If the subject comes up today, many people simply assume I believe in “free love” or think my parents take drugs.

These negative reactions from others while in “mainstream” society made me ashamed of my past. In my later years I have felt a great need to investigate the 60s movement and communal movement not only to understand these movements, but to understand myself. It has been only recently that I have been able to resolve the conflict of my two pasts, bringing my two childhoods together in order to understand who I am as an adult.

Utopian thought, as the basis of communal ideology, idealizes social unity and maintains that humanness exists only in intimate and collective life (Kanter 32). Within these small scale communities great emphasis is placed on providing a controlled and manipulated envi-

ronment in which social life may be structured to create the perfect human being. In other words, the belief of happiness in the present, or “heaven on earth” underlies the establishment of utopian communities (Kanter).

Communes in the 60s and 70s are classified into two main types. One is described as an “Anarchistic,” or “retreat commune” in which there is an agreement to reject establishment and organizational worlds. It is purposely disorganized because any form of organization is foreseen as archaic (Fitzgerald 8 & Kanter 176). Usually anyone is welcome, members are transient, and there are no rules or regulations. This type of commune, for obvious reasons of disorganization, usually doesn’t last long.

For example, the Oregon Farm, a small and short lived rural commune emphasized individualism so much so that there were no real guidelines for living. There were no established norms for membership, sexual conduct, meal times, etc. Members were transient and there were many heated squabbles and distrust about who got what and why. Furthermore, there were arguments about who did what kind of work. For example, the women felt it was unfair that they had to do all the housework and child care responsibilities while the men worked in the fields, etc. (Fairfield 190).

The second type is called a “service” or “intentional” commune in which people pool resources and agree to live a certain way with a motivating philosophy. Membership is more closed, residents must commit to the commune’s purpose. This type is socially organized with leaders and rules (Fitzgerald 9 & Kanter 196). Usually this type of commune has a sense of mission and zeal that binds the people within the commune together toward a common goal (Kanter 191).

A Case Study—The Farm

I will be using the Farm as a case study in attempt to explain and understand the movement toward communal living during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Woven throughout will be examples taken from personal experiences, some from materials written by The Book Publishing Company on the Farm, but mostly from interviews conducted of Farm members.

The Farm is a 1,750 acre commune in Tennessee founded by Stephen Gaskin, a former English professor at San Francisco State University. Prior to starting the Farm he noticed that he was losing his best students to the Haight-Ashbury movement and decided to look into it for himself.

Haight and Ashbury are two connecting streets in San Francisco where college drop outs from all over the United States congregated. They had “given up on society” and it was here where they experimented with alternative consciousness and psychedelic drugs.

Steven began holding alternative classes including Taoism, the I Ching, Magic and Mysticism, along with different religious teachings and beliefs from around the world. Stephen then left the University completely to hold meetings at the Straight Theater in San Francisco and then at the Family Dog. Excerpts from these may be found in the book, *Monday Night Class*, transcribed from the weekly meetings.

Students who had dropped out of college began asking Stephen to speak at their home campuses. A tour was arranged through churches and colleges across the country. The tour ended up a four month caravan because so many followers went with Steven and people joined along the way. My parents learned about Steven and his followers while they were traveling through Missouri when they attended a speech held in Columbia. These meetings were recorded, transcribed, and published by Random House in *The Caravan*.

After returning to San Francisco in the year of 1970, Stephen and other original “flower children” didn’t like the changing scene at Haight-Ashbury which had turned to the use of hard drugs. Stephen and about 350 of his followers headed to Tennessee to get a piece of land and live a different life. My parents and myself at 5 months old joined along the way. The population subsequently increased up to 1350 with about 400 still remaining there today.

The Farm would be considered a “service” or “intentional” commune because of its social structure. It has leaders such as Stephen Gaskin, the minister or spiritual guide, who performed marriages and held Sunday services at the “Meadows,” a wonderful spacious grassy area. It was during these services that us kids were allowed to play freely all morning without interruption.

There were also “straw-bosses”—those picked to overlook and organize the motor pool, farming, horse crew, construction, store, etc. My father was the straw-boss for the horse crew. At first all the agriculture was done with work horses.

Besides the straw-bosses, everybody had a work role on the Farm. People were encouraged to commit to a kind of work that they desired. My mother was a school teacher at our local (Farm) school. My father, after he worked on the horse crew, worked on the painting crew off the Farm in order to bring cash into the local (Farm) bank. I harvested produce, worked on the pony crew, and occasionally worked at the local (Farm) store handing out rations of flour, sugar, oil, etc.

People considering joining The Farm are required to “soak”—to spend time living within the community to see if they really want to make a lifetime commitment. I remember these people well, they asked frequent questions and were very curious—all of a sudden I was an expert.

The larger mission of The Farm was anti-materialism, not having any more than is needed in order for there to be enough to go around the world. According to the Farm philosophy it is wrong that some people own 5 million dollar houses while others don’t have enough to eat. On the Farm we were committed to strict vegetarianism because we believed there would be more food to go around the world if people ate soybeans instead of cattle.

Vegetarianism on the Farm was taken very seriously. For example, I remember the adults at “Seven Nations” (my house) having a meeting because my grandmother sent a gigantic block of Wisconsin cheddar cheese to us. The adults were deciding whether to give the cheese to the neighbors (off the Farm), or to just bury it! Meanwhile the kids, myself included, managed to finish off the entire block of cheese before the issue was resolved.

Plenty is a non-profit organization, established by the Farm, to help feed the world and bring justice and peace. It sent volunteers to Guatemala to help the Indian people after the earthquake in the 1970s. It set up an ambulance service in the South Bronx with a response rate a half hour faster than the public ambulance service. The ambulance service was located right down the street from Mother Teresa’s Mission and the crew stayed with the Sisters at night to protect them.

Plenty exposed the negative aspects of nuclear power when it brought a lawsuit against the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) when the Supreme Court refused to hear it because of the controversy surrounding the issue. I remember, as a child protesting outside a neighboring nuclear power plant holding a sign that read “What About The Kids?” We were successful in closing the operations of that particular plant down.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the circumstances were ripe to the development of alternative lifestyles. The Farm is just one example of the many communes that sprung up from the unrest during that time.

Purpose for Social Reconstruction

Within the interviews I conducted with former Farm members, similar ideals were expressed when I asked “why did you decide to reject the status quo and join a commune?” Here are some of the replies:

- We wanted to see what we could do;
- To learn how to live together as self-sufficiently as possible;
- We wanted to work together in a caring environment;
- We wanted to escape the capitalistic greed and hypocrisy;
- We wanted to create a lifestyle that would be fair to raise our kids;
- To get away from the city and take care of oneself;
- To learn how to live together in a spirit of honesty and compassion, to raise sane healthy children, to live as self-sufficiently as possible.

The two main purposes shared by communes during the late 1960s and early 1970s were the rejection of capitalism and returning to the basics. Although the stereotype suggests that communes were places where people practiced free love and drug experimentation, it simply isn’t as simple as that. Most of these things were done outside of communes during the 1960s and 1970s as previously indicated during the Haight-Ashbury movement.

It is true that some experimentation did in fact take place on communes, but it wasn’t necessarily the purpose of communes. For example, there was one group marriage of six people (three men and three women) committed to each other in the early days on the Farm. However, this attempt soon disintegrated into three couples. The Farm was based around the family unit with monogamy a central value. Furthermore, despite the stereotype, there was no alcohol, cigarettes, or hard drugs on the Farm. Drug use was confined to marijuana smoking and other “natural” psychedelia on occasion.

The primary purpose of communal living during the late 1960s and early 1970s was to repersonalize a society, making person to person relations the core of existence to promote greater intimacy and fuller human development (Kanter 213, 8).

By rejecting the established order on which capitalism rests, competitiveness and production is replaced by unity and cooperative work. In communes people pool their resources and work together instead of against one another because an emphasis is no longer placed on competing for material goods, but instead on friendship and family. The Farm, for example, was economically based on the Book of Acts where it says: Those who believed shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one’s needs (Acts 4:32-35).

Secondly, communes during the 1960s and 1970s were formed in rural areas where people sought a return to the land (Kanter 54). Through agriculture, communes became more self-sufficient, not having to rely on outside income as much. The growing of food gave a feeling of accomplishment, a connection with each other and with the land. In this way people found a sense of unity with one another and the land. For example, I remember harvesting strawberries, green beans, potatoes, tomatoes, etc., with the rest of the crew living at Seven Nations (my household). It was very rewarding and many times celebrations were centered around harvest times.

Context—Economic, Social, Political

In attempting to understand some of the reasons underlying the movement toward communal living in the late 1960s and early 1970s it

is important to place it within the economic, social, and political context of the time.

First, industrialization boomed after World War II causing the economy to flourish. Many of the young people who grew up during this prosperous time expressed feelings of estrangement, isolation, impersonalization. While their parents were focused on material accumulation after having grown up during the Great Depression, young people felt there was something missing in their lives—a void that needed to be filled.

As dissatisfaction with capitalism grew, many young adults expressed their attitudes through their rejection of materialism and renewed interest in spirituality. For example, one man I interviewed from The Farm put it this way,

“I grew up in the Suburbs and it was nice but all the houses were the same with an identical palm tree in the front yard.

“It was really boring and the people didn’t seem happy.”

Second, along with the industrial boom, advances in technology which produced both the atomic bomb and television, made people feel detached from their environment: that they were not in control of it, too far removed from it, and beyond understanding it (Fairfield 3). Even when it came to food, people felt detached from it or alienated from the process which produced it.

A quote from Walt Odets illustrates this: “It started with a package of meat...”

It was explained on that package that the meat contained was ‘Smoked, Chopped, Pressed, Cooked, Sliced and Ready to Eat’ and all of this according to ‘A Secret Recipe.’ It was sandwich meat. Not a creation of the pastures, but one of the factories (Fairfield 2).

On the other hand, it was through technological advancement that young people were able to communicate their messages. The electronics industry allowed young people to spread their messages more persuasively through music (Gardner 17). One example, a song by Bob Dylan:

“You that hide behind walls
You that hide behind desks
I just want you to know
I can see through your masks...”

“You fasten all the triggers
For others to fire
Then you sit back and watch
While the death count gets higher

“You hide in your mansion
As young people’s blood
Flows out of their bodies
And is buried in the mud...”

“I think you will find
When your death takes its toll
All the money you made
Will never buy back your soul.”

(Morgan 133).

It was also because of television coverage of the Vietnam War that people for the first time were actually able to view the consequences of warfare. The My Lai Massacre, for example, vividly showed American troops slaughtering an entire village—men, women and children. There were reports of American soldiers raping women and displaying other barbaric behavior.

The print media allowed young people to communicate to other young people. Several underground periodicals devoted specifically to the “get back to the land” ideal were important to the development of the rural commune movement (Gardner 19). One such periodical well known today is “Mother Earth News.” One of the people I interviewed from the Farm learned about the community through the periodical “Hey Beatnik!” printed by The Book Publishing Company by the Farm. It led him to join shortly thereafter.

Along with the prosperity resulting from post World War II, there grew an emphasis on education. Young people had more leisure, education, and security than any previous generation, providing them with the opportunity to question the established order and reflect on alternative options (Gardner 11).

Third, and probably the single most potent contributor to the communal movement was the political disruption and what was viewed as hypocrisy of the system during the 1960s. Although the majority of the American people were against the Vietnam war, it still dragged on. Many felt it was hypocritical to claim to be a democratic nation when our President continued a policy that was not supported by the people. Watergate was the clincher. President Nixon had to resign from office following the break-in of the Democratic National Campaign headquarters at Watergate and the subsequent efforts at a cover-up.

The assassination of those with new ideals such as President John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King shocked the country and resulted in many viewing the actions as reflecting a moral deterioration of the United States.

Furthermore, the violent break up of political protest resulting in the killing of four students at Kent State University, the deaths of two black students in Jackson, and the assassination of the of Black Panthers leadership, further lead to the disillusionment of young people (Gardner 7).

It was the combination of industrialization, technological advancement, prosperity and materialism, political disillusionment, and moral decay that brought the young people from the Haight-Ashbury movement of visionary psychedelia and politically defiant college students together to flee to rural utopian communes in attempt to escape the Establishment and take control of their own physical, cultural and spiritual environment.

Current Outlook

It is my prediction that for many of the same reasons for the movement toward communal living in the late 60s and early 70s, we will see a resurgence of communes in the 90s. First, Technology is

advancing at a mind spinning rate increasing the potential for further alienation of people from the land and from other people as well.

As a result of technological advancement, our economy has moved toward corporate production so much that the small family operated business is becoming a scarcity today. For example, with every new K-mart, Walmart, Shopko, and Target the small town feeling is becoming less personalized. The small mid-western town that I am from is almost not recognizable to me today. Another example is the disappearing small farmer due to competition with agribusiness.

It is my observation that when people are removed from their means to a living and forced to work as a commodity for a big corporation, the mechanical and impersonal conditions result in alienation, personal dissatisfaction, and a loss of dignity and sense of purpose.

Secondly, political disillusionment was apparent in the last election. With the turn toward Republicanism I have to predict harsher conditions for the working class, widening the gap between the "have's" and "have not's." With this widening gap, I predict even more crime and social problems in the future for the U.S.

Although there is not yet a great surge toward communal living in the 90s, there are recently a few budding communes. First, four new Catholic Worker communes cited in The Catholic Worker newspaper, are committed to living off the land while working and living together with other people. They are dedicated to causes such as assisting AIDS patients, and fighting the Continental Grain Conglomerate—an operation that is buying up farm land and raising millions of hogs inhumanely, while destroying the landscape and small farmers (Meyer 1 & 8).

A second new type of communal living, referred to as "cohousing," is cited in U.S. News & Report. Muir Commons, in Davis California, is a cohousing development designed and built by a group of people who banded together and bought property. They built a cluster of single-family homes around a common house for sharing meals, child care, laundry, recreation, holding meetings and keeping overnight guests. The idea was to build a close community and affordable and environmentally responsible housing (Streisand 82).

To ensure against the isolation of suburbia, houses were built townhouse style in rows facing each other. There are no shrubs or

fences and cars are parked behind the homes. The front doors are made of glass and the kitchen windows face front so parents are able to see their children from the kitchen (Streisand 83).

Third, with the help of modern technology—computers, fax machines, toll-free telephone lines, and video cassette training tapes, rural women have become entrepreneurs. They use the skills such as sewing, cooking, etc. that women have been practicing for centuries. The Women's Art Colony Farm in Poughkeepsie, New York has become self-sufficient through their annual harvest of Christmas Trees. They view their farm as their "own country, a place to make silkscreens, rooms to write in, and woods to ramble in" (Blakely 26).

Conclusion

From a personal experience, the Farm was about justice, sincerity, honesty, humanity, and peace. The Farm taught me to rethink the status quo, question authority, and stand up for what is right. The values of our culture—greed, and other self serving ideologies are less important to me. The Farm not only gave me a whole different set of values to continually strive toward, but made me who I am today. I now realize that the Farm values have been with me all along and that I have not in fact lead two separate lives.

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